



The Bullshit of Karma

By Ari Dimitriades

Napoleon once remarked that religion is what kept the poor from murdering the rich. Without knowing the context, I pondered that quote as a great example of cynicism from a world leader who figured out that being a good person was for suckers, and that well-behaved people never made it into the history books.

Of course, in my short life, I've run into people who firmly believe in such things as karma, and who routinely inform me that "what goes around, comes around." We hear it from religious leaders all the time as well, who admonish us to be good and not to give into the easy life of those who spurn the rules. And we content ourselves with a certain degree of smugness that everyone who's stepped over people will get theirs in the end.

Is there any bigger lie than this?

Let me explain what I mean by this, by applying it to the everyday world that we, average men and women, inhabit and where we make our daily bread. We all pretty much agree that really bad people like Hitler or Stalin certainly deserve eternal torment because of all the death and suffering they've inflicted. We look upon ruthless figures and just know in our hearts that their

crimes are being marked down most certainly yes by some invisible force that will requite them at the end of the day.

But the rest of us? Well, since we're destined not to be remembered by history, or have our speeches and actions studied by later generations, we cling to the notion that no matter how badly we get treated by co-workers or friends, we cannot do anything "bad" against them to get revenge because that's going to lead to bad karma. Now think about this for a second: someone crosses you at work, disrespects you or whatever, and you verbalize some imprecation against that person. How many times have you heard someone tell you, "No, no, don't say that. They'll get theirs. You need to be the better person."

And herein is the crux of the matter: if you are wronged by someone, why is the onus of being good on you when you're clearly a victim? Why should someone admonish you when you've done nothing to incur the negative action?

I believe most of this stems from the way we've been conditioned by religious or other spiritual figures to see bad things as some kind of test of character. To make it concrete, I had a co-worker once with one of the best work ethics I've ever seen. And no doubt, she'd run into people who didn't treat her very well. Nothing terrible, but in my observations, she was subjected to some very questionable manners, and I often asked her, "Why do you let people treat you like this? Why don't you refuse to do X, or make it clear that you will not do X until they act with some decency?"

Whenever we had these conversations, I was angry but she was rather calm, and she always said, "Oh, it doesn't matter. They'll get theirs." Yet from the way she said that to me, it was almost as if her reacting negatively was worse than what was inflicted on her: in other words, it was a test of her character.

Over the years, I've come to see that bad people—the ones we encounter in our everyday lives who make us miserable because they have some power over us—do not get their just deserts. There is no moment of revelation for these people, no sudden realization that they've upset some cosmic force and are going to bring misfortune upon themselves. In the real world, this virtually never happens, yet we, the trundling decent folks, accept this. We do nothing against it. We don't strike back when wronged because we are content to believe, as forced down our throats by religion, that we need to be the better people and not "stoop down to that level." We bank on these beliefs because that's what religion has promised us: bad people get punished and good people are rewarded. But rewarded with what? That we will finally get to see those who wronged us finally pay for it? It's a slight variation of the funeral fantasy, you know, the one where you view your own internment and see the person Who's Really, Really Sorry that you're gone?

So in thinking about Napoleon's statement, I believe he was speaking about this hold that religion has over our lives in keeping people down. I also further believe that the concept of karma was invented by priests (okay, brahmins) who wanted some intangible power over their

social lessors so scared them into believing that their negative actions would lead to a rebirth as some animal or insect. Who wants that? Better mind your P's and Q's.

It's a recipe for total exploitation.

I am not suggesting that the answer is for poor people to start murdering the rich. Or that if you're wronged in some way at the office or the grocery store, to start meticulously planning some delicious revenge. In fact, I am not advocating revenge of any kind. What I'm questioning is why we cling to the superstitious and damaging belief that when wronged, we need to appeal to some notion that we need to be better people and let it slide. Sometimes, you do have to pick your battles, but I also believe that you need to fight those battles. I do not believe that being wronged in some way is a test of character or faith—that assertion alone carries a certain amount of arrogance. After all, who is testing you, God? Who the hell are you to merit the sudden attention of the Almighty?

The bullshit of karma haunts us at every turn, even those of who don't subscribe to it. We may consider ourselves rational people, but when it comes to karma, we suddenly retreat into a demon-haunted world that is testing us and wants to see what we do. Pick the wrong action, and we come back as cockroach. Can there be any more irrational idea than this? Why in our everyday lives do we allow small forms of abuse and indignities? Trust me, in my limited experience, I've never seen people who truly deserve to get run over by something large get humbled. I've seen good people get fired, futures thrown into doubt and injustices flow like liquid from a stream, and no comeuppance or no rectification. What made these cases worse is that people in positions of influence did nothing. They sat by and let bad things happen to good people. Is that some kind of a test as well?

I'd venture to say that some religious leader would take exception to my words as proof that such actions lead to immorality or unethical behavior (or is an example of "materialism"), completely ignoring that fact over what started it all. Again, look at where the onus of behaving nicely falls. It's quite an irony that religion can't even make people be nice to one another, but will instill a fear of standing up for yourself and taking control of a situation and righting a wrong. Somewhere, a god is laughing about that.